



Hickory Ridge and Batestown: Local Life Before the Park



Little Union Baptist Church, Batestown, 2003. (NPS photograph)

The Cabin Branch Community

Before the creation of Chopawamsic Recreational Demonstration Area in 1933, the lands of Prince William Forest Park were not heavily forested. Instead, hundreds of small-scale farmers, laborers, and others lived in the area. Two communities - Hickory Ridge, which developed west of the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine, and Batestown, to the mine’s east - were home to many locals; others lived in the Joplin area in the southwest of the park. Batestown, established by African-Americans following the Civil War, still exists, but the creation of the park and its use by the Office of Strategic Services during the Second World War brought an end to Hickory Ridge.

Agriculture, Population and Labor

Tobacco ceased being an important cash crop in Prince William County during the late eighteenth century. Soil fertility fell, and bulk transportation became difficult as siltation closed the port of Dumfries. The few large tobacco plantations broke into smaller farms, and wheat and vegetables became primary crops. Slavery remained part of local life until the Civil War (1861-65) and emancipation.

The county’s population did not grow with the state’s, as local residents took advantage of opportunities in the expanding western territories of the U.S. Between 1800 and 1940, the county’s total population increased only 28%, from 12,733 to 17,738, while the state’s grew by 66%. People of African ancestry composed 45% of the county’s population in 1800, but only 14% in 1940.

Virginia was the site of great devastation during the Civil War and of extensive rebuilding afterwards. Employment opportunities in southeastern Prince William County were few, though the opening of the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine in 1889 and of the Marine Corps base at Quantico in 1917 provided nonagricultural blue-collar jobs to many local people.

Hickory Ridge: A Village for the Mine

People could raise their animals, raise their food, it was how they lived. Former resident, 1990s

During its zenith in the 1910s, nearly 300 people lived in Hickory Ridge, west of the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine (near parking area D). Hickory Ridge, established after the mine opened in 1889, included an Odd Fellows hall also used as a church and primary school by local blacks; a store, homes, and small crop fields that supplied local tables. People sold extra produce at markets throughout northern Virginia and Washington. The community obtained water from streams and wells. Light came from kerosene lamps. Residents conducted most local business through barter. The Great Depression had few effects on the area’s economy.

Blacks and whites owned property in Hickory Ridge and were neighbors, though Virginia passed a law forbidding integrated public facilities in 1924. Both races worked at the mine, but whites usually held better-paying, higher-skilled jobs. Life in Hickory Ridge, however, was different; there, African-Americans had leading places in community life. Among the notable residents was Mary Byrd, an African-American midwife. People recognized Byrd throughout the Cabin Branch area for her skill and expertise.

Batestown: Freedom Near the Quantico Creek

The Cabin Branch Community was an isolated, yet self-contained, community . . . Local resident, 1990s

Batestown began after the Civil War as a community of former slaves and free blacks from the family of Betsy Bates (fl. 1850), the local matriarch. It is possible that a local white landowner donated the village’s land to the Bates family. In the 1930s, many Batestown residents were her descendants, living in a hamlet considered the ‘black’ section of Dumfries in that segregated era.

As in Hickory Ridge, the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine provided jobs to many Batestown men, who also farmed and harvested timber. Women with outside employment usually worked as domestic servants or, occasionally, as teachers. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Batestown had approximately 150 residents; at the beginning of the twenty-first, nearly 75 people called it home.

Many Batestown residents worshipped at the Little Union Baptist Church - which also attracted people from Hickory Ridge - and sent their children to a small primary school on today’s Mine Road. Older children from the Cabin Branch area attended more distant high schools in Occoquan or Manassas. Young and old shopped at the Thomas family’s store and at businesses in Triangle and Dumfries.

Life in Hickory Ridge and Batestown

Many residents of Hickory Ridge and Batestown were nearly self-sufficient, growing or hunting most of their food and making most of their clothing. Locals also held jobs at nearby military installations, at the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine (until it closed in 1919), or did odd jobs to earn needed cash; the average local annual cash income in 1933 was \$536 (equivalent to about \$7,500 in 2003 dollars). Few paved roads crossed the landscape, and the existing rutted roads made extensive travel difficult.

Stores were important institutions in the local communities. Among local shops were the W.W. Payne store in Hickory Ridge - the company store

for the pyrite mine - and the Thomas Store across from the Little Union Baptist Church in Batestown. They sold goods that local residents were unable to grow or make themselves. These stores, and businesses in nearby Dumfries and Triangle, also served as places where people socialized, catching up on community news.

The church was a key social institution in both communities and still is in Batestown, where the Little Union Baptist Church, built in 1903, ministers to its faithful. Church rituals - from baptisms to funerals - and holiday celebrations added to the sense of community felt among local residents.

The New Deal and Change: Chopawamsic RDA

In 1933, the new administration of President Franklin Roosevelt launched dozens of programs and agencies intended to alleviate the hardships of the Great Depression, including the Resettlement Administration (RA). Led by economist Rexford Tugwell, the RA wanted to move poor farmers from small, “marginal” plots to more fertile locations, while creating recreational areas for the urban poor. RA officials identified 15,000 acres (6,070 ha) 30 miles (48 km) south of Washington, D.C., as “marginal” land, prime for urban recreation.

The Resettlement Administration used the creation of Chopawamsic RDA as an example for relief administrators across the country to follow by publishing a booklet about the site’s development in

1936. In this pamphlet, the RA asserted that the people of Joplin, Hickory Ridge, and Batestown needed the help of the U.S. government to escape poverty. Nevertheless, many local residents did not think of themselves as poor and were not interested in leaving their homes.

The Department of the Interior acquired title to most of the lands of the new park through purchase or condemnation. Officials from the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, the agencies charged with developing the RDA, slowly began removing residents from the new park. With the entry of the United States into the Second World War in December of 1941, this changed.

The Second World War and Legacies

Initial federal acquisition of lands for Chopawamsic RDA proceeded slowly, and some residents of Hickory Ridge had not relinquished their properties before the U.S. entered the war. However, the park’s location, close to Washington, yet rural, and its five cabin camps, capable of housing nearly 200, made it an ideal location for military officials to place secret intelligence training camps.

From 1942 until 1945, the Office of Strategic Services trained spies and radio operators in the park’s cabin camps. People who had not yet moved from their homes within Chopawamsic RDA were forced to leave, some within two weeks of notification. Some people moved away from northern Virginia; others relocated to land on the borders of the park. OSS

training activities destroyed what remained of Hickory Ridge. Plots of Virginia pines near parking area D and Pyrite Mine Road now mark the locations of village structures. Several cemeteries containing the remains of Hickory Ridge residents are located near the site of the community.

While its residents no longer rely on small farms and timber harvesting for their sustenance, the Batestown community still exists. Centered around the Little Union Baptist Church on Mine Road near Dumfries, many of the community’s residents are descendants of its founders.

Resources for Further Study

Few books or articles analyze life in Hickory Ridge or Batestown. However, these studies and others provide historical context for the communities:

Heinemann, Ronald L. *Depression and New Deal in Virginia: The Enduring Dominion*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983.

National Park Service, *Prince William Forest Park*, <<http://www.nps.gov/prwi>> (May 2003).

Parker, Patricia. *The Hinterland: An Overview of the Prehistory and History of Prince William Forest Park, Virginia*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1986.

Payne-Jackson, Arvilla and Sue Ann Taylor. *Prince William Forest Park: The African-American Experience*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2000.

The Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine issued scrip coupons such as these to its employees in the early 1900s as part of their pay. Workers used scrip for purchases - often at inflated prices - at the company’s store.

Courtesy Weems-Botts Museum, Dumfries, Va.

